

THE PROPHET CONFRONTS HIS  
WORLD  
BY  
W. L. POTEAT

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# The Prophet Confronts His World

By  
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# The Prophet Confronts His World.

BY WILLIAM LOUIS POTEAT, LL.D.

*Address to the North Carolina Convocation of Ministers,  
October 27, 1936, at Winston-Salem*

Who is this prophet introduced here for our inspection? Is he some Samuel on the hunt for excellence to crown it? Some Elijah bursting out of the wilderness to rebuke public wrong in purple and gold? Some Isaiah of the city with eyes for six-winged seraphs and ears amplifying to thunder the still small voice? Some headless prophet of the Jordan walking down history the greatest of his line? An angel of Ephesus or Smyrna or Pergamum, a star in the hand of him of the snowy hair, flaming eyes, and voice as of many waters,—a star to guide, to expose false prophets, to destroy the synagogue of Satan, to rekindle dying fires, to call the covetous and complacent to repentance? A Savonarola crisping and charring in the street of the city he sought to save?

I think the prophet of our topic belongs in this honorable succession, so lofty, so imperious, and so hazardous. Do you recognize yourself and accept your station in the long line? Or do you say, "Ah no; I haven't the gift of prophecy. The future is a closed book to me." Yes, but the prophet is a forthteller, not a foreteller. He represents God in a generation which forgets him. He speaks for God with a message to declare and a vision to display; he is not a scribe teaching details of doctrine, reciting routine prescriptions, appealing to precedent, passing on a lifeless tradition. He will not occupy himself with fitting scraps of ancient prophecy to current events, nor will he satisfy the curiosity of devout but idle-handed Christians by setting for the hundredth time a new date for the Second Coming with observation. If he have the sagacity to read the signs of the times and recognize the flow of events, he may, as his predecessors

## *The Prophet Confronts His World.*

did on occasion, look a little way into the future and give notice of approaching blessing or disaster. But even that sort of "prediction" is incidental to his calling.

The prophet is the minister of the word of God. That word, which came to choice spirits of the elder time, is recorded in the Bible. There is no warrant of Scripture or of reason for calling the Bible itself the word of God. The Bible says that Jesus is the word, and that the word of the Lord came to Samuel, Nathan, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. It then proceeds to tell us what the word was. The record of the word which came to these and other men is authoritative and valid for all time, and the prophet who delivers the word to his own age must master the word of past ages. But the travail of these great spirits cannot discharge you from a like travail if you are to see the King lifted up in beauty, if you are to hear His voice in intimate revelation and command. The word which came to David or Isaiah, great, noble, and ultimate as it remains, is not a living word for the prophet of to-day unless it is born again in the hidden parts of his own soul. Paul's third heaven ecstasy lifts no later prophet thither. It only inspires and beckons. With clean hands and bowed head and utter pliancy of will, with consecration which harbors no reservations, he must pass into the secret place and present a garnished emptiness to the fulness of the Divine Spirit. Once behind the veil, enveloped by the Infinite Presence, he "will not count his company" or think of precedent or critic or peril. And coming out to report his vision and proclaim his message, what can Isaiah say or Paul or Calvin? And he will speak with an authority which no man can gainsay or resist. Difficult as it is, we may forgive bad grammar and rhetoric in the prophet, narrow range of intellectual interest, poor voice, or shabby appearance. The unpardonable sin for him is to stand before men and women with no word of God throbbing for utterance, with no light for their perplexed minds, no balm for their bruised hearts.



## *The Prophet Confronts His World.*

You see, gentlemen, we are hungry for assurance and refreshing. Our eyes are holden by material interests; we want them opened to the heavenly vision. Darkness and storm envelop us; we want light and shelter, the light of authority, the comfort of understanding and sympathy. I know you are handicapped by an imperious tradition. I remember that Christianity travelled west with Paul. It crossed the Aegean from Asia, its home, to Europe, its problem. The Western mind, unlike the Eastern, makes demand for an intellectual account of the religious experience. The divine message is haled before the bar of reason and asked to justify itself there. And so one hundred and fifty years had not passed when Christianity became a philosophy in addition to being a new way of living, where Christ left it. You are heirs of this tradition of rationalism, and you too fall to apologetics, draw analogies and philosophize, erect a logical system, and garner the mental toil of the Christian centuries in a creed. Creeds have historic and perhaps other values. But I know the Apostles' creed is longer than their Lord's, and it follows that the Shorter Catechism is not short enough. The New Hampshire Confession confesses too much. The Thirty-nine Articles are thirty-eight too many. The creed of Christ has one article: Love God and people. That is enough for me.

Let me insist upon the radical discrimination between the religious experience on the one hand and such intellectual accounts of it on the other. And so we think of the preacher as a prophet with a message to the heart, a task for the hand, a vision for the venture of the imagination, an authoritative revelation out of the warmth of his own experience,—a prophet, not a metaphysician buttressing up a body of abstractions with a cold dialectic. Frankly, John Doe and I are not greatly interested in your metaphysics. We don't understand its terms and are always asking what's the difference. The fact that Archbishop Anselm and Abelard debated their theories of the atonement is no reason we should fight one another over the same ground today.

## *The Prophet Confronts His World.*

I remember Abelard thought the Archbishop's wrinkles more remarkable than his learning. Accordingly, we rejoice that our Lord gave us an example to be followed, not an abstraction to be understood.

There are, indeed, some complacent Christians demanding what they call "the pure Gospel," a harmless mixture of theory and sentiment, which appoints them no task, which cracks no whip of conscience over their aimless lives. Others live in an elaborate house of cards erected on the slight foundation of an enigmatical book's enigmatical allusion to a period of a thousand years, and take no part in making the will of God prevail in human intercourse or arresting social wrongs. Let things wax worse and worse, let social injustice go unrebuked, let wars and rumors of wars continue their irrational havoc of treasure and life. Worse must decline to worst before Christ comes to destroy in cataclysm what He found Himself unable to regenerate by the Gospel. Yet others would snatch brands from the burning, save as many as may be saved out of a doomed world, with never a thought of putting out the fire, of saving the world, which Jesus said was the field of His endeavor.

And some preachers acquiesce, do they not? I have heard of a North Carolina pastor who said to a prophet of God, "I believe every word you say, but you know we pastors have to follow our people." Such leaders are coach-dogs, following in front. I am afraid the high calling does not ring clearly in these prudent ears, afraid they haven't seen lately the King lifted up in beauty and sovereignty. Is the hero stuff oozed all out of the prophet? Let him come again in penitence and resolution to the secret place—penitence and resolution, for I tell you God will have no words with poltroons. A fresh experience of love and absolute commitment will recover him his high calling and secure him in a commanding leadership. No substitute for experience. Sir William Turner was called to paint a storm at sea. He had himself lashed to the mast of a sailing vessel.

## *The Prophet Confronts His World.*

He barely survived the storm, but there is only one picture of the power and frenzy of the sea. Lacordaire had himself lashed to a cross in a crypt of Notre Dame the hour before he rose in the pulpit upstairs to preach on the crucifixion of Jesus. The stony walls of the Cathedral have been weeping ever since for very pity.

We now turn to look at the world which the man of God confronts to-day. We agree at once that things are not all different. Today is only yesterday with its eyes opened. We see more things far and near. Science has created a new heaven and a new earth. The heavens are enormously expanded, grown now to be a fine sphere six billion light-years in diameter and composed of millions of galaxies like our own and trillions of stellar units many times brighter and more massive than our sun. Expanded, but still as mysterious as it was to Galileo and the star-gazers of Babylon. The "fretful midge" on which we live and suffer is enormously contracted. The gigantic machinery of communication and transportation makes the world a neighborhood, multiplies our contacts, and deepens our interdependence out to the fringes of humanity. Last week a man completed the circuit round the globe of 25,000 miles in ten and a half days. Winston is in instant communication with Calcutta, and the folly of Japan affects the tax rate in North Carolina. Here is opportunity for co-operation, but for conflict as well.

Such changes have resulted from the applications of modern science. It is well to remember that they are changes in the externals, the machinery, of life, not so much yet in life itself, whose fundamental features, interests, and needs remain the same. For one I decline to be embarrassed by the complexities of the new order. I unify them in a common subjection. They are my servants. I decline to be frightened out of my inner securities and commitments by the clatter of apparatus.

The industrial revolution is another result of the applications of modern science. Details need not be cited. It is a



## *The Prophet Confronts His World.*

commonplace of observation. It is sufficient to say in general that the instruments of production at half capacity can produce more than the country needs; but it must be added to our shame that people die of starvation in sight of plenty. The existence of poverty in the United States today is a public dishonor. The instruments of destruction can reduce to dust in a moment the accumulations of centuries. And we the people who make them go to bed every night trembling for fear the thunders of war wake us up before morning. We ourselves have made no corresponding development. We can't manage the machines we make. Geniuses in mere things, imbeciles in morals.

Another feature of our world today need not surprise us, the dominance of the economic standard and motive. Things, processes, and actions are judged by possible financial returns. If liquor makes revenue, debauch your citizens to get it. If the law safeguarding marriage loses the State money, rescind it. If the Pure Food and Drug law needs revision at the expense of fraudulent manufacturers, for the the protection of the people, why, the people be damned, save the infant industry! Have we not given to wealth the keys to all the palaces of distinction and all the reservoirs of power? We speak of the House of Astor, the House of Vanderbilt, the House of Mellon, setting up a sort of nobility of pelf as against the English nobility of blood and the French nobility of culture.

A more important change affecting profoundly our intellectual life came with the doctrine of evolution. The imaginative conception of the sum of things has been recast. Practically all of our higher disciplines are new in approach and method, as witness the new astronomy, the new psychology, the new history, the new—I think I have heard of the new—theology. And of course, the new attitude is woven into the texture of every expression of the intellectual life of the time.

A few good and true people are left who are unable to accept the doctrine. They think it hostile to religion. And

*The Prophet Confronts His World.*

they are not comforted by hearing that evolution is the Divine method of creation, that you do not dispense with the Divine Agency when you discover how it operates. And it must be admitted that some minor voices speaking, they say, in the name of science, assert with extravagant emphasis that all the gods are dead along with the great God Pan. They tell us that witches and fairies have taken flight before the light of science, and with them the myths of religion also. This new materialism you meet on the street and everywhere in current literature. The intelligentsia smile at the preacher and hand him down patronizingly a bit of advice, "Go study a little science and find another job."

Permit me to allude to one other detail in this sketch of the world today. I refer to the international standard of morality. Here are irresponsible dictatorships in Europe, France and England lately outraging their professed high moral standards in international relations, primitive ferocity resurgent in Spain, organized crime in America with world-wide ramifications, economic rapacity exploiting the poor, the fever of nationalism mounting to delirium everywhere so that treaties no longer guarantee peace, the stupid waste of militarism spending in one peace year ten billion dollars preparing for war, flinging all experience to the winds,—it is enough to cloud the widest heaven faith ever stretched. Has the God whom the ancient prophet pictured moving in the affairs of men dropped His task for other interests, or turned malevolent? Can we answer when scoffers deride us saying, "Where is now thy God?"

There's your world, gentlemen, the field of your adventure. Confront it frankly with open eyes. What do you think of it? What do you propose? Will you back off and say, as so many say, "You can't change human nature"? Might as well let the poor devils who were born of the wrong parents or in the wrong place eke out quickly in inevitable misery their useless lives, the less help the more quickly. Let the ghastly little hells where landlords fatten and humanity rots at the roots fester on from community to

## *The Prophet Confronts His World.*

community. Let the silly dominant race destroy its treasures and itself with refinement of efficiency. Maybe some fine type of Polynesian will do better. Let big business grow bigger with its hobnails in the neck of labor and its grip on the throat of government. Let the whole grand mass of pride and folly and sin and hate and sorrow go careering down the ringing grooves of fate to ultimate oblivion. Possibly the cleansed earth will smile again to welcome a more promising adventure.

I think you will rather say, "Here is something too precious to be lost. If the Lord and protagonist of life who rescued me from a fate worse than oblivion, the hell of lost ideals,—if He thought it too precious to be lost, I think so." Man is the crown and justification of the long creative process. The moral and spiritual faculties of man, at length admitted to a place in nature as real as the organs of digestion, top off man, so that man so gifted is the unique and most excellent item in the illimitable spaces of "this mysterious universe." The whole thing seems to have been made to get him. Now, it happens that we know what these high powers report more certainly than we know what the senses report. What the senses report constitutes the field and harvest of the scientist. What the moral and spiritual faculties report is precisely the sphere of the prophet. And we have seen that what's wrong with the world is here, just here. We are self-centered and selfish, and selfishness is the greatest of sins because it is the mother of all. The only way to expunge it from the human heart is to establish the reign of love there. It follows that love is the medicine for the sick world. The word of Jesus above all others, central and characteristic is this, that love of God and neighbor is the summation of the Divine requirement. He does not abrogate the ten words of Moses, but guarantees their fulfilment. For love is the fulfilling of the law. Love worketh no ill to a neighbor, confers benefits on an enemy.

Dare you confront the world today with this word of prophecy? Press its application in practical life, in the

## *The Prophet Confronts His World.*

home, the school, the newspaper, in business, in politics and legislation, in government and diplomacy, and you are likely to hear from it, not in acquiescence but resentment. The authority of the family may be in hands of its meanest member, and he will tell you to mind your own business, as though that sort of thing were not your business. Warn the newspaper and the movie against spreading a layer of filth over the whole of life and poisoning the fountains of the national life. They will answer, "The people demand it, and we must let them have it." Tell the business man his profit system is obnoxious to the law of Christ and must be replaced by co-operation, as Mr. Filene of Boston lately said. He will reply, "You are an impractical dreamer. Better attend to your business with the souls of men; get them ready for the next world and safely out of this one. Go eat the bread of safety in Judah; prophesy no more in Israel." They will tell you corporations have no souls and by inference are not amenable to the individual standard. But corporations are composed of men and they do not escape the human obligation by their association. If the corporation misleads, the men agree to lie. Similarly, a sin does not change its hue by being national. Politicians lie and steal and slander, and explain that all is fair in politics. You venture to allude to the universality of the Divine law, and straightway you observe an attack of solicitude for the sanctity of your calling and are advised not to mix religion and politics.

Now, such responses will sober your confidence, if they do not alarm you. What do they indicate? The hopelessness and defeat of the Christian program? No, not that, but the need to press it. The bugle does not sound retreat, but a charge. These responses show our great business of evangelism is unfinished, possibly poorly done. Maybe, we have not recognized its urgency. Maybe we have been too much occupied with things incidental, out on the periphery, or hardly related; with what is likely to happen on the other side Jordan, rather than what is actually happening in the wilderness this side. Have we been flabbergasted and

## *The Prophet Confronts His World.*

the nerve of our enthusiasm cut by the precious pride and posing of the minor scientists, whom we ought to ignore, and have we failed as yet to hear the great scientists, those on the frontiers of discovery, who declare almost unanimously that there are spheres of reality to which their method and apparatus are not appropriate, who think materialism folly, and feel that the beauty of the universe suggests an Infinite Artist, its order an Infinite Intelligence, and its invisible ministries an Infinite Friend?

Have we presented the Christian life as a surrender of all that interests us, all that delights us, and made the impression that Jesus is a kill-joy, imposing limitations and impossible burdens? How could we forget that He came, as He said, to give life and to give it in abundance, to enlarge its volume and enhance its quality. For He is the center and circumference of our interest and obligation and hope. And if we can see Him as He is and lift Him up before hungry eyes in His beauty and radiance, He will draw all men unto Himself. And transformed men will transform the society which they constitute. The men we pick to do our public business, local, national, international, picked not to govern us but to serve us, will drop the double standard of morality and be ruled by the single law of love in public action as in private life. So will the kingdom we long for come and the will of God be done wherever the sun looks down on human folly and frailty and sin.

As to opposition, that will stir you to capacity, it will add the tang and fascination of adventure to routine. I never understood why men suffered the pains and privations involved in pushing through perils to reach the North Pole—what would they have when they found it?—I never understood until I reflected that they were responding to the challenge which Nature flung down to their skill and endurance. She cried, "Come on, if you dare. I will grind your iron ships to powder in my jaws of continental ice. I will stab you through and through with my frost daggers. I will starve you on my wide blue barren wastes." And



*The Prophet Confronts His World.*

heroism answers with expedition following expedition into the darkness and cold. And in your nobler adventure to save the world of men I hear you say to yourself,—

Soul, rule thyself. On passion, deed, desire,

Lay thou the laws of thy deliberate will.

Stand at thy chosen post, faith's sentinel,

Though hell's lost legions ring thee round with fire.



